

The Final Debate

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The seven famous Lincoln-Douglas Debates occurred across Illinois 150 years ago. Perhaps the most famous debate, and the final one, between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas was held in Alton, on October 15, 1858. It helped establish much of the groundwork for the abolition of slavery in the United States.

Newspapers in the day predicted that there would be a large crowd, but in fact this meeting did not attract a large audience. The number of people that came did not even exceed five thousand. It was the second smallest crowd of all the debates.

It was a 115-mile long steamboat ride down the Mississippi River for Lincoln and Douglas to get to Alton. Both candidates arrived very early in the morning, around 5:00 a.m.

When the candidates got there, a large crowd waited for Douglas and a very small one waited for Lincoln. They were each escorted to separate hotels; Douglas to the Alton House, and Lincoln to the Franklin House, where Mrs. Lincoln, and their eldest son, Robert Lincoln, were waiting for him.

People started to arrive to hear the debate throughout the morning. People came on foot, on horseback, by carriage, steamboat and train to hear the debate, which began around 2:00 p.m. A table was set up for the reporters in front of a platform that had been erected for Lincoln and Douglas to give their speeches.

The Alton debate provided the men with their final chances to talk about the issues. This final debate was focused mainly on slavery and the Union. Neither candidate said anything that was really different from past debates. They used most of their time to sum up the arguments that they had started in the past six meetings.

They each had an hour and a half to talk. The first hour was given to Douglas, in which “he devoted his time to an impassioned defense of popular sovereignty, and delivered a renewed attack on Lincoln,” according to Harold Holzer. He talked mainly about how Lincoln would not answer any of his questions on slavery, and he talked about how Lincoln was a bad person for thinking what he thought about slavery.

Douglas also strived in his comments to distance himself from President Buchanan, a fellow Democrat. He was also trying to make himself seem closer to Henry Clay, who was Lincoln’s hero. He also made a strong appeal for unified support for Democrats. He declared that it was the only party for “national men.”

Onlookers reported that Douglas’ voice sounded “completely shattered,” and that he looked “bloated” and “haggard.” On the other hand, people said Lincoln looked “fresh,” but also “stubborn.” He addressed Douglas’ charges clearly, logically and convincingly.

During the second part of the debate, which was a full hour and a half, Lincoln attempted to differentiate between favoring black equality and extending to black the blessings of the Declaration of Independence. He also scolded Douglas for his lack of “statesmanship” because he refused to take a moral position on slavery.

The last half hour was given to Douglas. He resumed his attack on Lincoln's congressional voting record during the Mexican War. He tried to embarrass Lincoln for turning against Henry Clay in 1848 to support a rival Whig, Zachary Taylor, for the presidency. Douglas ended his time, according to Harold Holzer, with a "horrible attack on agitators, who now assailed only slavery but could easily wage war someday soon on another domestic institution."

Soon after the debates, a Democratic newspaper published a thirty-two page pamphlet about the debate in Alton. Other newspapers wrote about the debates, including the *Chicago Times*. Their reporter called Lincoln's speech at Alton, "Most improper and ungentlemanly." The *Chicago Journal* said that Douglas' speeches were "full of spleen, verbose nonsense and weak falsification."

After all of that work by both candidates, Douglas won the election for the United States Senate. Even though Douglas won the election, what Lincoln said about slavery stuck. Today, every state in the United States remains free of slavery. Lincoln's recognition among voters across the country grew as a result of the debates. Many believe that the Lincoln-Douglas Debates were the springboard for Lincoln's election to the presidency two years later.

Out of the seven Lincoln-Douglas Debates, the idea to abolish slavery was presented, and now there is no more slavery. It was clear that Abraham Lincoln did not like slavery, while Stephen Douglas attacked Lincoln for his beliefs. The Lincoln-Douglas Debates played a key role in setting the future course of the United States. [From Edmond Beall, "Recollections of The Lincoln-Douglas Debate," as related to Illinois Historical Society, 1912; Richard Allen Heckman, *Lincoln vs.*

Douglas; Harold Holzer, *Lincoln-Douglas Debates*; Robert W. Johannsen, ed., *The Lincoln Douglas Debates of 1858*; and *The Lincoln-Douglas Debate*” as reprinted from the *Alton Daily Courier*, October 16, 1858.]